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ART AND WAR.

CLIVE BELL.

AN acquaintance of mine, a French artist, who used to live in England and paint pictures for which I care nothing but on which the cultured dote, started early in August to join his regiment, leaving behind him his wife and five children. So miserable was the prospect before these that a benevolent lady wrote to some of her rich friends, who happened also to be amateurs of painting, praying them to buy a picture or two and so help the family of their unfortunate favorite. One and all refused, severely giving the lady to understand that this was no time to think about art. Of charity they said nothing; but perhaps they subscribed to some conspicuous fund and put their servants on half-pay.

Charity, however, is beside my point. What interests me in this little story is the unanimity with which the cultivated people agree that this is no time for art. It interests me because I have lately been taken to task for saying that the cultured regard art as no more than an elegant amenity. The war has put my opinion to the proof and I am shocked to discover how much I was in the right. From every quarter comes the same cry—"This is no time for art!" Those galleries and exhibitions which are not closed are visited chiefly by homeless refugees; if

literary taste goes beyond the newspapers it is only to salute the verse of Mr. Begbie and the prose of Mr. H. G. Wells; even at concerts our ears are exasperated by national platitudes and the banalities of our Allies. This is no time for art. Good taste is unpatriotic; the man who continues to care for painting, poetry or music is little better than a Hun.

That people who in times of peace treat art as an amenity should feel that this is no time for art is, I suppose, natural. That they should expect those who feel that art is the most important thing in the world to do the same seems to me unreasonable. To those who care seriously for art, to those for whom it is a constant source of passionate emotion, the notion that this is no time for art seems as ludicrous as to a Christian mystic of the ninth century would have seemed the notion that that tortured age was no time for religious ecstasy. People who are capable of ecstasy, be it religious or æsthetic, are apt to distinguish between ends and means. They know that empires and dominations, political systems and material prosperity and life itself are valuable only as means to those states of mind which alone are good as ends. Thus it comes about that the things which to the majority are of primary importance, because to the majority they seem to be ends, are to a handful of mystics and artists of secondary importance because to them they are no more than means. They cannot forget about art and think exclusively about war because if they forgot about art the world and its ways would seem unworthy of thought. Public activities and operations they feel are of consequence only in so far as they affect the things that matter,—the raptures of art and religion, that is to say, and abstract thought and personal relations.

It is not reasonable to expect us to turn our backs on absolute good and consider exclusively what may be a means to good. Besides, we could not do so if we would. The artist must think more about art, the philosopher more about truth, the mystic more about God, the æsthete more

about beauty, and the lover more about the beloved, than about anything else. The fact is, we are not practical people; we cannot adjust ourselves to circumstances, so we must be content to appear imprudent and unpatriotic. We are not masters of our fate; not only have we got hold of what we believe to be the greatest thing in the world, the greatest thing in the world has got hold of us.

A crisis has divided the sheep from the goats—I care not on which hand I am marshalled—and now we know who are the people that love art because they must and who love it because they think they ought to. I am making no moral judgment; I am pointing out merely that those who say “This is no time to think about art” admit that for them thinking or not thinking about art is a matter of choice. I have always supposed that it was perfectly well with one who had lost himself in an ecstasy of creation or contemplation. How can he be better off who has already attained beatitude? To invite such a one to relinquish the best and bestir himself about what may be a means to good seems to me absurd. That has always been my opinion and I cannot conceive the circumstances that would compel me to change it. Those who reject it, those who deny that certain states of mind, amongst which is the state of æsthetic contemplation, are alone good as ends, will find themselves in an intellectual position which appears to me untenable: I shall not quarrel with them, however, so long as they leave us alone and refrain from cant. According to them there are better things than Beauty or Truth or the contemplation of either. I simply disagree: it is only when I catch them wringing their hands over the ruins of Reims that I protest.

Take not the name of art in vain: at least be ashamed to use it for political purposes. Any stick may be good enough to beat Germans with. Beat them if you can: I shall have no tears for them and their strong military government. It is not people like me who will weep for Prussia. But, though any stick may be good enough, some are too good. Besides, however much we love

France and the French, let us have the justice to remember that if, as seems probable, French soldiers were using the cathedral as a post of observation, the Germans, according to what are called the rules of war, were in the right. In that case it was the French themselves who first transgressed that law which, they now tell us, makes neutral and inviolate works of art. For my own part, I utterly deny that it can ever, in any circumstances, be right to destroy or put in jeopardy beautiful things. But for any of those governments which took a hand in the deliberate ruin of the summer palace at Pekin to prate of vandalism and pose as defenders of art is not only disingenuous but silly. The spectacle of European soldiers and statesmen who, to admonish such evil Chinamen as might persist in defending their liberty and their religion, destroyed without demur the masterpieces of Oriental art, the spectacle, I say, of these people whimpering over the late Gothic of Louvain or the early Gothic of Reims, strikes me as being what the French, if their sense of humour had not suffered more than their monuments, would call "*un peu trop fort.*"

Reims is, or was,—I am not sure whether we are more conscious of what existed before the bombardment or of what we imagine remains—Reims is or was a typical thirteenth century building; and, like most thirteenth century buildings, is or was, to my feeling, of no great artistic significance. That it is a venerable focus of sentiment no one denies; so, I suppose, is the monstrosity of Cologne and the Albert Memorial. I am not concerned with sentiment, but with art. Therefore, I must note that of such artistic value as the cathedral ever possessed the greater part was not destroyed by the German bombardment: it was destroyed when, some years ago, the upper part of the church was made as good as new by the ministry of fine arts. Only the glass, and the sculpture over the little door in the north transept, and a few twelfth or very early thirteenth century figures which had escaped restoration will be a great loss to the world; and, for our comfort, we may remember that the glass was not comparable with the

glass at Chartres or Bourges, while finer sculpture is to be seen in scores of Romanesque churches. I can listen with admirable patience to tales of damage done to Reims cathedral; but should the abbey church of S. Remi have been injured it would be less easy to pardon the responsible party. S. Remi is a masterpiece of the eleventh century, and was still, when last I saw it, a work of splendour and significance in spite of having suffered at the hands of French architects worse things than it is likely to have suffered from German gunners.

It is a mistake for the English upper classes to assure the world that they prize a work of art above a victory; the world knows better. Are not these the people who were telling us just now that this was no time for art? Is it seemly in them, is it prudent even, to revile their own class in Germany for caring as little about art as themselves? When the Germans sacked Louvain and shelled Reims our politicians and press discovered suddenly that art is a sacred thing and that people who disrespect it are brutes. Agreed: and how have the monied class in England respected art? What sacrifices, material, moral, or military, have they made? Here, in the richest country in the world, with what difficulty do we raise a few thousand pounds to buy a masterpiece. What institution do we starve so abjectly as we starve the National Gallery? Has anyone met a rich man who denied himself a motor-car to keep a genius? How dare the people who fill our streets and public places with monuments that make us the laughingstock of Europe, the people who cannot spare a few guineas to save a picture, who cheerfully improve away respectable architecture, who allow artists to perish and put up the Admiralty arch,—how dare such people pose as the champions of culture and expose their wounded feelings in the penny and half-penny papers. In times of peace they used art as a hobby and a means of self-advertisement, in war-time they would brandish it as a stick against their foes. The old abuse was vulgar, the new one is worse.

We can measure the sensibility of these politic amateurs when we overhear their chatter about patriotic art and catch them, as we caught them lately, attempting to ban German music. "Give us patriotic art," they cry. As if art could be patriotic or unpatriotic! One might as well cry for patriotic mathematics. The essence of art is that it provokes a peculiar emotion, called æsthetic, which, like religious emotion or the passion for truth, transcends nationality. Art's supreme importance lies precisely in this: its glory is to share with truth and religion the power of appealing to that part of us which is unconditioned by time or place or public or personal interests. A work of art satisfies us æsthetically, just as a true proposition satisfies us intellectually, whether it was made in Germany or elsewhere: by whom it was created, when it was created and where it was created are matters of no consequence to anyone but an archæologist.

There is no such thing as patriotic art. The qualities in a poem, a picture, or a symphony that lead people to describe the work as patriotic are purely adventitious and have nothing to do with its æsthetic significance. Wordsworth's so-called patriotic sonnets, in so far as they are works of art—and what superb works of art they are!—are as appreciable in Berlin as in London. They appeal as directly to the æsthetic sensibility of any German who can read English and appreciate poetry as to the sensibility of an Englishman; and unless a man be æsthetically sensitive he will never really appreciate them no matter where he was born. The state of mind which art provokes and which comprehends and reacts to art is one in which nationality has ceased to exist. I am not saying that an ardent patriot cannot appreciate art; I say that when he appreciates it he is carried into a world in which patriotism becomes meaningless. If he has not been carried into that world he has not appreciated art. I shall not deny that at the present moment an Englishman may find something peculiarly sympathetic in the ideas and memories associated with the poetry of Wordsworth. It is conceivable

that a Frenchman may find unpalatable certain memories and ideas associated with the music, or more probably with the name, of Bach. But these memories and ideas are not a part of the music; they are only the contribution of an unæsthetic auditor. The man who says that he can no longer appreciate the music of Bach merely admits that he has never appreciated the music of anyone.

Two things above all others give value to a civilization, art and thought. It were well that those even who cannot appreciate Beauty and Truth should bear this in mind. Instead of blustering about this being no time for art they should rejoice that there are some who, rising above tumultuous circumstance, continue to create and speculate. So long as a sense of art and the disinterested passion for truth persist, the world retains some right to respectful consideration; once these disappear its fate becomes a matter of indifference. The continued existence of a stupid and insensitive world, incapable of æsthetic rapture or metaphysical ecstasy, is not particularly desirable. It may be wise to wage war for the sake of civilization; that is a question of probabilities with which I am not at present concerned; but a war that leaves the world poorer in art or thought is, whatever its political consequences, a victory for barbarism and for humanity a disaster. A nation that would defend the cause of civilization must remain civilized; and that a nation may emerge civilized from fierce and exhausting war, that it may preserve unabated its power for good, it is necessary that during its horrid and circumscribing labours there should have been men who, detached and undismayed, continued to serve interests higher and wider than the interests of any state or confederacy. In times of storm and darkness it is the part of artists and philosophers to tend the lamp. This duty they perform unconsciously by simply minding their own business.

Artists and philosophers and those who are apt to handle truth and beauty are, in fact, the vestals of civility. To be sure they are not appointed or elected, neither are they consecrate nor shorn nor always chaste; nevertheless, they

tend the lamp. Because they alone can project their thoughts and feelings far beyond the frontiers of states and empires, because their sympathies and interests are universal, because they can lose themselves in timeless abstractions, because their kingdom is not of this world, they alone in times of division and calamity and short-sighted passion can keep the flame alive. Thus do they unintentionally serve the state. So far as they are concerned their beneficence is quite adventitious, their service supererogatory. For they do not live to serve humanity but to serve their masterful and inhuman passion; by serving that faithfully they save the world. Let them continue to think and feel, watching, untroubled, the cloudless heavens, till men, looking up from their beastly labours, again catch sight of the unchanging stars.

Mens equa in arduis: calm and unconcerned in the hurricane: the mind set steadily on indestructible things: that, I think, is how it should be in these days with artists and philosophers. When the Roman soldiers entered Syracuse they found Archimedes absorbed in a mathematical problem. He never raised his head and they killed him where he sat.

I want to save those nice, cultivated people who go about saying that this is no time for art from doing some harm and making themselves ridiculous. To them, not to the artists, is my mission. They are in danger of becoming coarse and absurd and of saying things that their enemies will never allow them to forget. They are not formidable: besides, art is fearless. For art cannot die; neither can the desire for art. If history teaches nothing else worth remembering it teaches that. Artists will create though they must starve for it and art we will have though our days be numbered. Artists and those who care for art may be a mere handful in the human mass, but theirs is the passionate faith that conquers somehow in spite of battles and holds the world in fee.

Art survives: the state of this chilly quarrelsome little planet has never grown so desperate that artists have lost

faith. After all, why should they? Art is not less important because some men are bad and most are wretched; and it is no part of an artist's business to straighten out the contortions of humanity. "The loss of hue to river-banks," observed Ch'êng Hao, the Sung poet, "is the river-banks' affair." Art has seen worse days than these. Between 937 and 1059, if we may believe Glaber, there were forty-eight years of pestilence and famine. From Constantinople to Exeter the world was one miserable sore. Cannibalism became chronic. In the market-place of Tournus human joints were exposed for sale. Man had sunk to such depths of impotence that the wolves came out and disputed with him the mastery of Europe. War seems to have been the only activity for which the leaders of the people were not too feeble: let us hope that they kept honour bright and preserved nicely the balance of Neustria, Austria, and the kingdom of Italy. And over all hung, as well it might, the terror of judgment and the end of the world. Yet art survived. The years that lie round about the millennium are precisely those in which artists seem to have been unable almost to do wrong. Then it was that the æsthetic sense, rising calm above confusion, detached and remote from human woes, expressed itself gravely in that early Romanesque architecture and sculpture which remains the imperishable glory of the middle age.

There have been wars as great as this; there may be greater. Empires and Continents have gone down and may again go down into misery. Art survives. What remains of Egypt but her monuments? In Babylonia there were kings and princes before the coming of the Assyrians; there were statesmen, generals, and priests: but the glory and story of that land would be for us a vague, bad dream were it not that the sculpture of the vanquished Sumerians remains splendid and unobscure. Kublai Khan, that conqueror of China and scourge of all the East, lives, if he live at all, in the verse of an English poet, while the art

of the people he came to destroy is the great glory of Asia and the inspiration of half the world.

To be or not to be thinking about art is not a matter of choice. Art is imperious. As well tell an artist not to breathe as not to create. Artists will be artists: and so far as I can see the spirit has never foundered in the wreck of material things. If those ancient ministers of the devil, fire and sword, pestilence and famine, could not force men to stop creating and feeling, I do not suppose that journalists and politicians and inactive colonels and fire-eating curates will be more successful. There never was a time that was no time for art. In the darkness of the darkest ages the æsthetic sense shines clear. Were not the masterpieces of Attic comedy written in a beleaguered state in the throes of a disastrous war? And was it not in 1667 that England suffered what has been called her greatest humiliation? Certainly it was in 1667 she received her greatest epic.

Few, indeed, can look steadily at their own times. To the ephemera that tossed on the waters of the past the ripples were mountainous; to us the past is a sad, grey lake, scarcely ruffled, from which emerge the tall lights of art and thought. It must be a defective sense of proportion, I think, that makes people who cite Aristophanes but never heard of Conon, who are deep in *Paradise Lost* but neither know nor care who won the battle of Lowestoft, assert so confidently that this is no time for art. Let them, for their own sakes, consider what sort of figure in history one would cut who had adjured young Shakespeare—thirty years of age and, if one may draw inferences from tradition, able at least to shoot—to give over his precious fooling and join the expeditionary force in Portugal. Yet the moment was grave: we had lost *The Revenge* and failed ignominiously before Cadiz: we still expected invasion. Shakespeare and the rest of them might surely have done something for their country.

CLIVE BELL.

LONDON, ENGLAND.